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Homes for Hawaiians dedicated at Leiali'i

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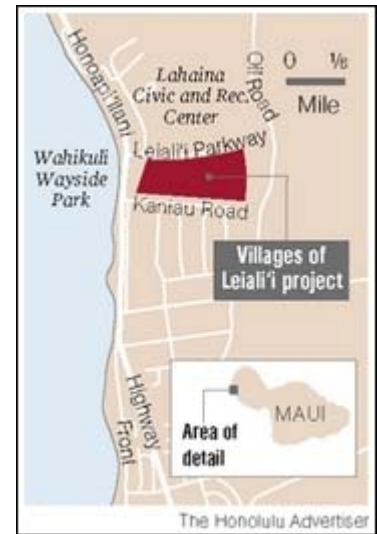
LAHAINA, Maui — The long and contentious saga of the Villages of Leiali'i came to a happy ending yesterday with a dedication ceremony for 104 homes for Native Hawaiian families, some of whom had waited more than 30 years to move onto homestead land.

Any lingering frustration residents might have felt over the lengthy delay was outweighed by an overwhelming sense of joy and relief at finally being able to occupy their new homes, purchased for prices ranging from \$145,000 to \$250,000.

Calvin and Davida Sambrano were the first to move into the neighborhood, which lies above Honoapi'ilani Highway between Lahaina town and the Ka'anapali resort. Residents are a crosswalk away from the ocean and enjoy mauka vistas of the West Maui Mountains.

"We've got a million-dollar view," said Davida Sambrano, 53, a meat wrapper at Safeway in Lahaina who bought a three-bedroom home for \$220,000. "I'm a millionaire right now. I'm riding on Cloud Nine."

Sambrano's late mother, Emmaline Oponui, applied for a homestead property 40 years ago but did not live to see her family awarded one of the Leiali'i lots.



The site was part of the 1.4 million acres in ceded lands taken by the United States after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. When Hawai'i became a state, the lands were placed back under state control, with a portion of revenues from use of the properties funding the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and its programs to benefit Hawaiians.

When the state, under Gov. John Waihe'e, moved to develop the Villages of Leiali'i as an Act 51 fast-track affordable housing project open to all residents, OHA and a group of Native Hawaiians filed a lawsuit in 1994 disputing the state's right to sell or trade ceded lands. They said the state never resolved Native Hawaiian ownership claims and did not have legal title to the land.

At the time of the court challenge, the state already had invested millions of dollars in roads, sidewalks and other infrastructure at Leiali'i, but further development was stalled for a decade as the court case played out.

In 2003, under Gov. Linda Lingle, Department of Hawaiian Home Lands Director Micah Kane approached OHA to see if the agency would support a transfer of the property from the state Housing and Community Development Corp. of Hawai'i to his department so it could be developed under the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act.

Although the ceded lands issue remained unresolved, OHA agreed to support the transfer, and the property was deeded to the DHHL in 2004, clearing the way for home construction at the Lahaina project and on other ceded lands in Kapolei and at the Villages of Laiopua in Kona.

The Villages of Leiali'i is the first Hawaiian Homes project in West Maui, a bustling tourist community with a large labor force that includes many Native Hawaiians.

Toddy Lilikoi, 57, said she applied for a homestead more than 20 years ago and had a chance at other DHHL projects in Central Maui, but it didn't make sense to move so far away from her job at the Royal Lahaina Resort. She was ecstatic to own a home just minutes from work, and will share the four-bedroom residence her family bought for \$250,000 with her children and grandchildren.

"This is where we live and work. It's small lots but it's home. We don't have to struggle so much," Lilikoi said. "For locals, not just Hawaiians, just to live and work in a place you grew up in and love is wonderful.

"Everyone is so excited for everyone. It's chicken skin to the max," she said.

Anela Haina, who also works at the Royal Lahaina, will move into a home with her mother and brother. "It's such a privilege to be able to reclaim what our ancestors left us, especially with all the development that's going on," said Haina, 30. "Housing in Hawai'i is so expensive, you need six incomes just to live comfortably, and now, to be able to own our own home on the west side, words cannot express how great it feels."

Kane said the Lahaina subdivision will allow West Maui workers who used to commute long distances to spend more time with their families. The homes will provide indirect benefits to non-Hawaiians, he said, since housing units will open for others as Hawaiians leave their existing homes to move into Leiali'i, and there will be less commuter traffic.

The Villages of Leiali'i is the fourth Hawaiian Homes subdivision on Maui developed by the Dowling Co., which financed the project at a cost of \$22 million. The average lot size in the 16.5-acre Village 1A section that was dedicated yesterday is 6,700 square feet, with homes ranging from a 1,298-square-foot, two-bedroom unit to a 2,218-square-foot, four-bedroom unit.

DHHL hopes to be able to award lots in the 253-unit Village 1B section later this year.

The Dowling Co. has built 422 houses for DHHL and is the largest private developer of homes for Native Hawaiians in the state.

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